Academic to Consultant: A Pilot Study on Sport Marketing Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study was to determine the level of consultancy currently taking place between Sport Management faculty and their respective athletic departments. The subjects of the study were Directors of Marketing of athletic departments within universities that offer Sport Management programs (N=201). A list of universities offering Sport Management programs in the United States was retrieved from the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) website. A link to an online survey was distributed to the Directors of Marketing via e-mail. Fifty-four useable responses were received for a response rate of 27%. Results of the pilot study, discussion, and future research on Sport Management consultancy are provided.

Introduction

Toews and Yazedjian (2007) likened being a faculty member in higher education to a Ringmaster in a three-ring circus. The three main responsibilities, or "acts," that academicians must juggle are research, teaching, and service. If a four-ring circus were to exist, consultancy might be added to the list of responsibilities for faculty members, particularly those in research-intensive institutions. Schmoch (as cited in Perkmann & Walsh, 2008) states that many universities will allow faculty to spend up to 20% of their time consulting. This time is worth the investment for research institutions as consulting is responsible for a considerable share of the United States patents filed by university researchers (Thursby as cited in Perkmann & Walsh, 2008). Consulting also generates a great deal of external funding.

The act of consultancy is defined as, "the provision of a service by academics to external organizations on commercial terms" (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008, p.1885). According to Reis (1999), there are a multitude of benefits for faculty members who consult with outside organizations or agencies which include gaining ideas and experience, obtaining research support, generating external funding, and creating industry opportunities for students. Consultancy may also provide more credibility to faculty members' expertise and relevancy to their curricula (Reis, 1999). The concerns that have been raised with consultancy are that it may detract from university responsibilities such as research (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008), teaching and service (Reis, 1999), that it might detract from academic relevance (Lee, 1996), and that it may be considered "double-dipping." Double-dipping is a term used to describe faculty members who earn a salary from the university, but use university time and resources for consulting which earns them supplemental income on top of their salary (Reis, 1999).

Review of Literature

Universities exist for a multitude of reasons, but three main responsibilities of most of these institutions are to educate citizens of the community, produce and advance bodies of knowledge, and share this knowledge with appropriate industries (Perkmann et al., 2012).

Knowledge-related collaboration by academic researchers with non-academic organizations is termed academic engagement (Perkmann et al., 2012). Through the process of academic engagement, knowledge that is acquired from research is transferred into the industrial domain. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Some examples of academic engagement include licensing (Agrawal, 2006), research centers (Adams, Chiang, & Starkey, 2001), and consultancy (Behrens & Gray, 2001).

Consultancy, or the transfer or sharing of knowledge by university researchers with industry professionals, has been described in the marketing and management literature using a number of different designations. It has been labeled engaged scholarship (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008; Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006), academic engagement (Perkmann et al., 2012), and academic consulting (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008). More specifically, in the fields of science and technology, the process has been labeled academic entrepreneurship, technology transfer, and commercialization (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008; Shane, 2004). For the purpose of this study, we will refer to the overall process as academic consulting, or simply consulting.

Consulting, while mutually beneficial to academic researchers and industry professionals, has long been a source of debate by both sides (Day, 1979; Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan, & Wonham, 2011). Academics are trained to search for problems, research the theoretical basis which underpins the problem, then collect and analyze data in order to draw conclusions regarding the problem. People working in industries are trained to perform tasks while creating ideas and solutions that will solve problems and help their organizations operate more effectively and efficiently. Ideally, academic research should compliment industry work by providing important implications and solutions to problems industry professionals face, making their jobs easier. However, this is not always the case.

According to Hughes et al. (2011), practitioners do not consult often enough with university professors to utilize their expertise. Conversely, professors conducting research do not consult often enough with practitioners to determine what issues or challenges warrant examination. Hughes et al. (2011) states that, "…schools have adopted an inappropriate model of academic excellence in order to gain credibility within the university environment, measuring themselves solely by the rigor of their scientific research, thus becoming less relevant to practitioners" (p.41). The authors argue that researchers in universities are focused on problem-finding and analytics where practitioners are in quest of problem-solving and implementation strategies. Therefore, a gap between research and practice has developed. Additionally, the pressure placed upon academics to achieve tenure in most research-intensive university settings may cause professors to strive for publishable research versus practical research.

Perkmann and Walsh (2008) sought to explore this gap between academy and industry by addressing three topics. Those topics included whether or not academic consulting resulted in more applied forms of research, whether or not academic consulting resulted in lower levels of research productivity, and how academic consulting contributed to innovation processes within firms. The authors defined academic consulting as the provision of a service by academics to external organizations on commercial terms. Services include, but are not limited to, "providing advice, resolving problems, as well as generating or testing new ideas" (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008, p.1885). The authors' research revealed three distinct types of academic consulting and varying levels of impact on universities and industry. The three types of consulting were opportunity-driven consulting, commercialization-driven consulting, and research-driven consulting.

Opportunity-driven consulting

Opportunity-driven consulting refers to paid forms of consulting whereby university professors seek to supplement their income with opportunities to do research in the field. When this type of consulting takes place, industry practitioners typically seek out the academic due to their expertise in a particular discipline and their ability to assist a firm in resolving problems or challenges. Perkmann and Walsh (2008) suggest that the success of opportunity-driven consulting lies in the fact that it "mobilizes expertise that is commonly held within academic communities" (p.1885). The cost to academics in this type of business relationship is minimal, because they already possess the proper field-related knowledge and do not necessarily require any additional training or preparation to conduct research and/or provide consultation.

Other characteristics of opportunity-driven research are that it is often short-term or time-bound and possibly viewed as minimal in academic value. It may also be seen as conflicting with the mission of a research university. Since opportunity-driven consulting occurs when firms are willing to pay university professors to assist them in solving practical organizational problems, the relationship typically concludes once the issue or challenge is resolved. In other words, the contract is fulfilled when the work has been completed and the professor has received pay. Then, the relationship terminates unless more work is offered and another contract is in place. Opportunity-driven consulting is most often applied in nature and may not produce the type of empirical research that produces publications and supports the vision and mission of the university. Therefore, this type of consulting may not be highly valued by a faculty member's institution and could detract from the overall scholarly productivity of the researcher.

Opportunity-driven consulting may be time and effort intensive and possibly have a negative impact on the teaching and service levels of university professors. The extra money earned from this form of consulting, if earned on university time, may be viewed as "double-dipping" and considered unethical conduct. Some universities require their faculty members to disclose any consulting work they accept as well as the financial remuneration they receive from consulting.

Commercialization-driven consulting

Commercialization-driven consulting refers to the invention process whereby faculty researchers take their inventions to industry professionals and seek to commercialize the technology, product, or idea. According to Perkmann & Walsh (2008), "inventors commonly retain their faculty position and work with the commercial entity via consulting, contract research, personnel exchange and advisory board presence" (p.1886). This is a mutually beneficial partnership because the commercial entity has the means to produce the invention and mass market it, while the faculty member is striving to transfer their project from research to reality. While the commercialization of the invention is taking place, the consulting services of the academic is often necessary to complete the process.

Commercialization-driven consulting differs from opportunity-driven consulting in a few ways. Commercial entities do not seek out inventors (academics) in order to solve problems. Rather, they team with inventors to commercialize their technology, product, or idea (Perkmann et al., 2012). The relationship between the two parties may be longer in duration than that of opportunity-driven consultants. Inventors may be a part of the development team for the project for an extended period of time. The two parties will also share financial gains from the commercialization of the invention (Boyd & Bero, 2000).

Research-driven consulting

Research-driven consulting derives from a relationship between a firm and a faculty member with common research goals (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008). Faculty seeks out industry contacts that will allow them to utilize their customers, employees, or other resources to conduct research studies. The firms are often interested in the results of the research because it will help them make better business decisions. Unlike opportunity-driven consulting, research-driven consulting is motivated more by the faculty member's desire to collect valuable data and publish their work versus making money. This form of consulting often helps academics gain insight in the industry and keep current on the problems and challenges therein (Hughes et al., 2011). Ideally, the conclusions and implications of the research should "solve" industry problems, a paradigm referred to as design science. "Design science is concerned with developing knowledge that provides answers to problems," (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 41).

The knowledge extracted from industry research can facilitate faculty members' productivity while also bolstering the experience for students due to enhanced classroom content. Research-driven consulting also has the benefit of involving university students. This can be done in various ways. Graduate students conducting research, as well as undergraduates doing the same, may be able to partner with faculty advisors to assist in the research process or collect their own data. Research-driven consulting, since it derives from the faculty member's industry contacts, can produce internship opportunities or field experiences where students work alongside industry professionals and gain valuable experience working for an organization.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this pilot study was to determine the level of consultancy currently taking place between Sport Management faculty and their respective athletic departments. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ_1 - Are athletic marketing directors aware of their University's Sport Management program?
RQ_2 - Are athletic marketing directors currently engaging in any marketing/consumer behavior research?
RQ_3 - Who are athletic directors consulting with for their marketing/consumer behavior research?
RQ_4 - Why do athletic marketing directors consult/not consult with Sport Management faculty for their marketing/consumer behavior research?

Method

The subjects in this study were Directors of Marketing of athletic departments within universities that offer Sport Management programs (N=201). A list of universities offering Sport Management programs in the United States was retrieved from the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) website. Each director was e-mailed the link to a brief survey (less than 5 minutes) regarding their knowledge and use of the Sport Management faculty for marketing research purposes within the athletic department. Fifty-four useable responses were received which elicited a response rate of 27%. For the purpose of a pilot study, the authors found this to be an acceptable response rate.

Results

The results of this pilot study on sport marketing consultancy were sufficient to provide some preliminary insight into the relationship between sport marketing departments within universities and the Sport Management academic programs on the same campuses. *Question One* asked respondents for the division level of their athletic department within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Of those marketing directors that responded to the survey, 55% were from Division-I athletic departments, 32% were from Division-II athletic departments, and 13% from Division-III athletic departments. *Question Two* asked respondents if they were aware of the Sport Management academic programs at their universities. An overwhelming majority (98%) responded that they were aware that the university offered an academic program in Sport Management on their campus. When asked in *Question Three* if their athletic department engaged in any type of consumer behavior/marketing research in the past two years, 78% of marketing directors responded that they did conduct research. Forty percent of respondents indicated they had conducted research one time, 48% answered two times, and 12% answered that they had conducted consumer behavior/marketing research three or more times in the last two years.

Question Four asked who had conducted the athletic department's research, and the respondents were given multiple selections (and asked to click all that apply) including: 1) Employees or students within the athletic department, 2) external consultants, and 3) Sport Management faculty. Of all the responses supplied from the survey, 70% were "Employees or students within the athletic department." Fifty-eight percent of the responses were "Sport Management faculty." And the last option of "External consultants" received 33% of the responses. The final survey item, *Question Five*, asked respondents why they did not use Sport Management faculty on their campuses to conduct consumer behavior/marketing research if they did not select that option to answer the previous question (Who was used to conduct the research over the last 2 years?). The response rate was considerably lower for this item (which we will address in the discussion section). Forty percent of the respondents indicated that the athletic department does its own research, 30% indicted that external consultants were more qualified, 20% said that Sport Management faculty had never reached out to offer their services, and 10% said the faculty lacked the proper expertise.

Discussion and Implications

While commercialization-driven consulting is not prevalent in the field of sport management, it is apparent from the pilot study that either opportunity-driven consulting and/or research-driven consulting are being performed at all division levels of NCAA athletic departments. This is a positive finding for sport management academicians, as they may be looking for consultation opportunities or to increase the amount of consultancy they are actively providing. The information gleaned from this pilot study on sport marketing consultancy is sufficient to commence a discussion on the importance of academic consulting in the field of sport management and provide some relevant implications. We can also offer notable positive and negative take-a-ways from the research.

First, the results indicate that more than half of respondents were marketing directors in Division-I athletic departments. This is not surprising given that most marketing and consumer behavior research would take place in these "big time" athletic environments. Given the impetus on driving attendance and generating revenue in D-I athletic departments, these directors are more likely to seek answers to marketing issues and challenges.

Next, one of the biggest positives in the results of the study is that 98% of respondents were aware of the Sport Management academic program on the campus of their college or university. This is a big first step for sport management faculty looking to initiate consulting. The best place to start is often right in your backyard with the athletic department on campus. If athletic events at a university are in need of greater attendance, an improved fan experience, increased donor support, or any other improvement and there are faculty members on campus that can provide valuable consultation, there could be a beneficial consultation opportunity. These types of partnerships are mutually beneficial and may (Opportunity-driven consulting) or may not (Research-driven consulting) require a financial commitment. Therefore, they make realistic, convenient places to begin sport marketing consultancy.

Another positive finding was that 78% of marketing directors were conducting some form of marketing/consumer behavior research, and they had done so recently, within the last two years. This means for many sport management faculty (even those first-timers discussed above), there is work to be done on college campuses and academics in this field should consider vying for the opportunity to provide their expertise and consulting services. Some sport management academics may not realize that their athletic departments are conducting sport marketing research and an appropriate opportunity to collect data, publish research, and actively consult exists. This is a prime example of what Hughes et al. (2011) eluded to, the lack of communication and/or shared goals and objectives by practitioners and researchers. Sport marketing directors want to solve problems within their sporting events and may not believe that faculty shares the same vision. Or, they simply may not think about faculty members as consultants who can assist them with these issues, and therefore, do not even communicate with them. Either way, a gap can form between sport marketing directors on college campuses and the sport management faculty members that possess the expertise to provide consultation.

A positive as well as negative result of the study was that some of the sport marketing directors were consulting with sport management faculty, while others were using employees (or interns, volunteers, etc.) and external consultants (e.g. marketing research firms). It seems as though some athletic departments have discovered the resources housed in sport management academic programs while other departments have not, or possibly choose not to utilize them. It is certainly positive to note that some sport management researchers are actively consulting and have bridged the gap with industry professionals, but there is still room for improvement.

Finally, it was extremely important to decipher the reasons behind why some sport marketing directors were choosing not to consult faculty for research purposes. This may have been a sensitive question, as many respondents did not provide an answer. The low response rate on this particular item may be due to the fact that sport marketing directors who were responding knew that researchers were conducting the survey. Of the limited responses that were received, the reasons given for not consulting with faculty members were that the athletic department does its own research, that external consultants were more qualified, that Sport Management faculty had never reached out to offer their services, and the faculty lacked the proper expertise (in that order).

While some of the reasons may be difficult for faculty to overcome (such as the athletic department does its own research), certain barriers may be much easier (faculty had never reached out). If sport management faculty is willing and able to consult and want to earn the opportunity, a meeting with the sport marketing or other relevant director may be all that is necessary. It is possible that athletic departments perceive external consultants as more

qualified because they are not fully educated on what academics are trained to do. Many industry professionals may perceive academics as teachers more so than researchers and this could explain why they label faculty members as unqualified. Hughes et al. (2011) also suggested that those working in industry perceive academic research to have little value in practice. Since much of it is empirical versus practical, this provides another rationale as to why sport marketing directors may solicit consultation from external firms. Sport management faculty should promote themselves and their research services to their own athletic departments and showcase the expertise and benefits they can provide.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This was a pilot study on sport marketing consultancy and while 201 Directors of Marketing were sent an online survey, the response rate was only 27%. A larger response rate would have provided more robust results. Future research could also delve deeper into the topic of academic consultancy. Determining which types of consulting are being conducted and how much money, if any, is being provided to sport management faculty and external consultants for their services is warranted. The amount of financial remuneration is an important indicator as to how much expertise the sport marketing directors feel their consultants possess and how much value they attach to the research, information, or support received.

Future online surveys could extend the sample to more than just sport marketing directors within athletic departments. Research may be conducted within communication departments, booster and development offices, or even athletic directors' offices. A mixed-methods approach to the research could also be taken. Following up an online survey with in-depth interviews of industry professionals may provide a wealth of knowledge regarding the gap between practitioners and researchers. A variety of methods could be employed to continue this critical line of research between industry and academy.

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